

Three ways to get a grip on the future of Illinois for another 200 years

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Much has been said and written this year about the now 200-year-old history of Illinois. But what about the next 200? What about the next 20?

The future of our transportation, information technology and gender equity were the focus of discussions last week in Springfield at an event hosted by the State Journal-Register and the Better Government Association.

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One of Illinois' biggest and most critical assets always has been its transportation network. We're smack dab in the middle of America, but we lost Amazon's HQ2 and we could lose more economic opportunity if we don't tend to that network. That means planes, trains, transit, roads and, especially, bridges, noted Illinois Department of Transportation Secretary Randy Blankenhorn.

| OPINION

Three quarters of Illinois' bridges are in need of repair. We should be rebuilding five major bridges a year, but we're working on one every five years, he said. "This is a crisis that's coming," Blankenhorn said. "This is what keeps me up at night."

If we want to build our communities, attract new people who can contribute to those communities and fund governments, then we need to invest in transportation, Blankenhorn and others said.

He called for an increase of at least 15 cents in the state gas tax, which hasn't been increased since 1990. Lindsay Hollander, senior policy analyst for the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, said transportation funding needs an overhaul and things like a freight usage tax need to be considered because gas tax revenues have been decreasing as engine efficiency increases.

The future in Illinois and elsewhere already includes some driverless vehicles and much stronger drones delivering tons of packages, added Imad Al-Qadi, director of the Illinois Center for Transportation. We should quit worrying about them because, so far, they've caused far fewer accidents than humans have. As State Journal-Register Editor Angie Muhs noted, "Autonomous vehicles won't be checking Twitter on its iPhone."

What's a File Cabinet?

If we want cost-efficient and transparent governments working for us, we need to invest in information technology upgrades that will pay for themselves in the long run.

State Rep. Jaime Andrade, chair of a new committee focused on data and IT, said Illinois has begun dealing with 2,500 software applications it uses, many of which date back to the 1970s.

Not only is data a rich natural resource, it's a resource owned by us, said Matt Topic, the government transparency lawyer responsible for winning the release of the Laquan McDonald shooting video. Topic, who also serves as the BGA's outside counsel, said Illinoisans need more transparency about what databases exist.

"We've not done a good job of understanding the cost of a lack of transparency," Topic said. "This is core to our democracy. It really is."

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If we've learned anything about our futures in Illinois and worldwide this year, it ought to have been that we must do better when it comes to treating each other with respect.

State Sen. Melinda Bush, a Grayslake Democrat who co-chaired a Senate task force on sexual harassment, said improvements were approved, allowing lobbyists to be suspended for harassment and bullying, and allowing the state's Legislative Inspector General to investigate harassment charges without first getting lawmakers' approval.

The future ought to include improving labor and other laws to protect independent contractors, temporary workers and, small business employees and limiting the use of non-disclosure agreements in employment contracts.

Bush, task force co-chair state Sen. Jil Tracy, state Rep. Carol Ammons and state Senate President Pro Tem Don Harmon agreed that truly changing the culture will take more time.

Harmon said he and other men have reflected on the question, "Have I been complicit in the marginalization of women?" Harassment training ought to include teaching bystanders to say something if they see something. "Call it out," Ammons said.

One of the recent revelations is that lawmakers had allowed their own watchdog, the Legislative Inspector General's office, to remain vacant for several years. Now, a system is in place that requires vacancies to get filled and applicants to be reviewed by outsiders. A new Legislative Inspector General will be approved by lawmakers early next year, Tracy said.

Lawmakers ought to allow members of the public to serve on the Legislative Ethics Commission that oversees the LIG's work. That would bolster a culture of accountability by leaps and bounds.

"We're going to have a better year next year," Tracy said.

The future is ours to make. Let's all get about the work of making it brighter for Illinois.

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